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ABSTRACT

Two teachers incorporated feminist pedagogical strategies into their literature/composition classroom. Feminist pedagogy seeks to break down hierarchical authority; to foster cooperation, collaboration, and the collective process; and to create a place where students learn from each other, taking responsibility for their own learning and becoming active participants. Specific classroom practices to create a setting in which students can write and speak with authority include: (1) a grading contract negotiated between students and teacher on the "terms" of the semester's work (evaluation and grading); (2) journaling (for students and teacher); (3) student-developed topics for writing activities; (4) small group work to talk about writing; and (5) large group discussion facilitated by feminist pedagogical techniques. (SR)

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Feminist Pedagogy in Composition Transforming Passive Receptors Into Active Participants

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Feminist Pedagogy in Composition Transforming Passive Receptors Into Active Participants

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Questions of authority in the composition classroom have arisen for us on two fronts. One deals literally with authorship as we spend time working with students as writers attempting to find their own voices, and to find something to say. The second concern has been the passive role some student seem all too willing to accept particularly if the teacher is willing to be the authority, and assume full responsibility for what happens in the classroom.

We both come to our present concerns about student's writing and authority in the classroom from traditional backgrounds in English Studies. However, those traditional classroom practices were put into question by our experience outside the discipline, working in Women's Studies. That experience, as women, challenged us to re-think our own classroom practices, and to attempt to incorporate feminist pedagogical strategies into the literature/composition classroom.

We will discuss issues of concern from us, and our responses in the form of specific classroom practices we have used to create a setting in which students can write and speak with authority. Those issues and responses include: a contract negotiated between students and teacher on the "terms" of the semester's work: evaluation and grading; journaling (for students and teacher); student-developed topics for writing activities; small group work to talk about writing; and large group discussion facilitated by using feminist pedagogical techniques.

To define feminist pedagogy we must first address some of the values which inform Feminism. Feminism holds the breaking down of hierarchal authority as one of its most compelling values, but our classroom experience tells us that while we share authority with our students, the teachers authority cannot be completely broken down. Ultimately we accept the responsibility and consequences of our authority. Feminists seek to foster cooperation, collaboration and collective process. Whether in writing collectives or consciousness raising groups, feminists strive for a sense of community: a safe place where trust is built; a place where students (members) voices and stories are heard and valued; a place where disagreement can be aired; where authority is negotiated. It is a place where students learn from each other, taking responsibility for their own learning, becoming active participants.

The idea of process is central to our philosophy of writing and

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teaching as it is to feminism. Process is non-linear, changing, growing, developing. Always in movement, the process of writing is one of discovery. It is the means of nurturing an embryonic idea, exploring and organizing one's thinking around that idea. Students discover that their authority does exist and that each of us has something of value to say.

Feminism, in the world and in the classroom, maintains that the personal is the political. This statement, coined at the beginning of the Women's Movement, captures the spirit of Feminism. For women to understand that their lives, their work and their stories were not isolated, incidental or unrelated to the world at large, "empowered" them to speak to society and address the prejudices they confronted every day. Teachers can use this adage to give students, the most marginalized "members" in the hierarchy of education, the power to articulate their voices and stories.

Since our pedagogy is one of cooperation and collaboration we decided to continue this essay in the first person reflecting the collective process we value.

Student/Teacher-authored Reading List and Grading Contract

At the beginning of the semester I talk with the class about the authority vested in the teacher's position, but before any discussion, I have them put their chairs into a circle so they can physically see each other. They talk about the idiosyncratic nature of evaluating writing, how any given group of experienced teachers will assign an assortment of different grades on the same text.[1] They talk about different readings; how reading is interpretation/criticism (drawing from reader-response theory)- thereby breaking down the authority of the text. Finally, they get to talking about what it is each wants and expects from the class (not necessarily in that order).[2] They write notes and produce lists of these expectations and after they've talked about these I give them their first two assignments.

First Assignment for Reading Prose Fiction

Class members are to look over the book list and pick their first choice. Each person should come to class prepared to talk about and defend his/her choice in addition to being ready to persuade the other members to pick this book.

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[1]Lil Brannon has made this observation over and over again in her workshops on evaluation in writing.

[2]See Nancy Schniedewind in *Freire for the Classroom*.

Novels to chose from:	Authors
Sula or Song of Solomon	Toni Morrison
Brown Girl, Brownstones	Paule Marshall
The Salteaters	Toni Cade Bambara
Meridian or Color Purple	Alice Walker
Their Eyes Were Watching God	Zora Neale Hurston
The Left Hand of Darkness	Ursula LeGuin
The Graveyard of the Angles	Reinaldo Arenas
I, Robot	Issac Asimov
Aesops Fables	
Ironweed	William Kennedy
One Hundred Years of Solitude	G. Garcia Marquez
El Bronx Remembered or In Nueva York	Nicholasa Mohr
Housekeeping	Marilyn Robinson

This may appear to some to be a very eclectic book list. Quite frankly and practically, I tell my students that many of these books were on my 75 book doctoral reading list - I always get instant sympathy from them. They are willing to "help" me out and have little trouble choosing a title in one class period. Class members chose another novel for discussion later in the semester. The only stipulations to their title selection are that the text be readily available and a work of fiction although this particular class selected a collection of letters entitled Dear America: Letters Home From Vietnam.

Class members begin the second assignment, the grading contract, outside of class. Here is how the assignment was worded:

Class members are to draw up a grading contract for the semester. Members are to attach a memo to their contracts discussing/outlining what grade they will be working towards. In other words, what does each student feel about what constitutes an A, B, C etc. and why. Be prepared to talk in a large discussion group about your contract guidelines. The contract may address any/all of the following (and/or anything else):
-attendance (how many days will students be allowed without an excuse?)

-deadlines (leeway for papers due, late papers, due dates negotiable?)
-PAPERS/WRITING
-form of papers (grade for form/appearance of papers?)
-grammar/mechanics (percentage of grade?)
-content
-revisions

JOURNALS
-paper number requirement (for A,B,C,D etc.)
-format
CLASS PARTICIPATION
-writing groups
-small and large discussion groups

Since the class was a writing intensive section, I tell them that journals are required though they decide how many entries the journal will include. Another stipulation I make is that they are required to do at least two revisions of each paper for a grade of A. In the beginning, some students protest but when they decide that the papers are not to be graded (the discussion of evaluation usually takes place this day), they don't mind the revisions at all. Arriving at a consensus on a contract that all class members, including me, are satisfied which took only one class period. Below is what we all agreed upon and signed:

Grading Contract
For the grade of A:

I. Full and active participation in large and small group discussions and writing groups.
II. Two 3-5 page typed papers with all revisions to be handed in on time (unless there is a very good excuse, e.g. doctor's note). Copies of drafts I and II of both papers will be required for each member of writing group.
III. No more than three unexcused absences; each tardy of more than ten minutes will equal a quarter (1/4) absence.
IV. Journal entries of a minimum of one half page (of 8 1/2 x 11) for each story; four entries for each novel (2pp.). Students may miss three entries from the total number due at the end of the semester.
V. Three essays to be written in class. Dates will be known ahead of time and any persons missing these must have: (1) a valid excuse and (2) make up the essay within one week of the original date.

For the grade of B and C, students are entitled to more absences and fewer journal entries. They are still required to revise papers, participate in writing and discussion groups but have one of two less in-class essays. The requirements for the grade of D or less, reflect what the class believed to be excessive absences (more than seven) and a non-committed student - someone who wasn't active in groups, seldom revised or kept inconsistent

journals (mission more than ten entries). I used my authority to add the following stipulations to the contract:

Note: Conditions for the grading contract have been agreed upon by all class members and the instructor through consensus; therefore, any student who does not meet the conditions for any of the grades outlined above will be given a grade deemed appropriate by the instructor.

Things that go without saying but should be mentioned anyway: All class members are expected to have done all the reading before coming to class. Cheating (on papers) will not be tolerated and will result in failure.

Furthermore, the instructor withholds the right to assign a take home final essay at the end of the term. This paper will not be graded and may be done collaboratively.

Despite what some may think, I found that when students are given the opportunity to decide with the teacher what they will be graded on and how, they reciprocate with more than the "minimum" writing required. the quality of this work is equal to, if not better than, papers written for "grades." Attendance, with usually only on e or two exceptions each term, is always regular and consistent. Students want to come to a class where their voices are heard and valued; a class they help to move.

Emphasizing participation in both large and small groups reinforces the sense of a community of learners and in the case of small groups requires active participation. One of the uses of small groups is the writing workshop which provides for a wider audience, and a greater variety of responses to student papers. Students learn to talk about writing, to help the writer see those places where communication has faltered, and to find ways to improve. The writing workshop is obviously not unique as a manifestation of feminist pedagogy, but it is, for both of us, directly related to an increasingly feminist approach to writing and teaching. The teacher's role in small group work is to set the stage for collaborative learning to occur, then move from group to group, listening and interacting, hopefully without throwing to much weight around. but none of this is to suggest that we have no authority. We, too, are individuals with ideas, voices and more experience to exclude ourselves from the class' writing groups. Sharing one's writing with others and talking about it is often uncomfortable, but the rewards of that effort are demonstrated in comments like, "I never would have thought of that!" or "Reading someone's paper made me think of another way of doing my paper."

Class Journals

I use class journals as a way of encouraging students to find

their own voices, and to write what they want to say in a non-threatening (non-evaluative) setting. I see its use also as a vehicle for establishing a sense of community. It is primarily a dialogue between each student and me, but I also ask if students are willing to share with a classmate, and as the classmate to attempt some written response. As the chief journal reader, I read with care (my goal is to be selective, but I usually end up reading all entries), responding naturally and honestly when the "spirit" moves me. Obviously, there is an unevenness about these responses, but I feel that an honest response is more effective than a forced one, and a clearer expression of who I am. I have asked them to continue this dialogue in their journals, but generally they have not done so. Short of some requirement, I have not found a way to make that happen. It is quite possible that my "honest" responses/questions have not provoked them sufficiently. However, their reluctance may support the sense that journals are their texts.

For the past two semesters, I have also kept a class journal. I offer it to the students, and invite them to write responses to my entries. Interestingly, this was far more successful in Women's Studies, the subjects being discussed were intensely personal and relevant (that is, each issue raised caused students to struggle with their own beliefs and attitudes). Literature provides this same impetus as well, but somehow the content of a Women's Studies course cannot be kept at a distance.

I have approached this journal-keeping differently each semester. Sometimes I have left it wide open; at other times, I have provided more structure. I prefer the former. When I have hoped to stimulate their thinking by posing a question or two, the questions have turned out to be more directive than I intended. If I Pose three questions, I get three "answers" even though I continue to tell them that the questions are designed to stimulate their thinking, not circumscribe it. Again, it seems to indicate a certain passivity; it is easier to simply think along whatever lines I, as teacher, am proposing. Having spent years in educational institutions, they are also quite aware that they have to be responsible for the teacher's lines of thinking.

Have these journal entries contained wonderfully astute literary comments? Frankly, no. Some students are still playing it safe. But occasionally there is something insightful that leaps off the page at me, and provides sufficient reason to continue working with the possibilities of journal keeping. When responding to student papers, I ask them to include as a journal entry, any response they might have to my comments. Here is an exchange between myself and a student about a paper.

My comment: If I am correctly reflecting what you were saying, you are suggesting that the authors misled us (deliberately?) in both stories, encouraging our sympathetic response only to

destroy that response in the end. Why is that an effective way of presenting the story? What would happen if we are not led to find something sympathetic about these characters? I guess I think you haven't pressed your discussion far enough; you've set the stage and reported what happened in the story, but haven't said why this intrigued or what you see as significant about the use of this technique.

Student's respond: I agree very much with your comment, "you've set the stage..." I thought I did a good job of reporting my goal in this paper, and in giving background about the two stories. The problem I had is that I never developed my paper in the manner that I had stated.

Facilitative Commentary

The work of Cy Knoblauch and Lil Brannon in Rhetorical Traditions and the Teaching of English[3] has greatly influenced how I respond to student writing. Brannon and Knoblauch argue that instead of evaluating the correctness of the student's text first, then going on the clarity and finally addressing the fluency of the text, teachers should reverse the order, concentrating on fluency first, clarity second and finally correctness. Facilitative commentary includes writing long comments along the margins of the student's text, engaging the student's ideas. In responding to my student's writing I seek to problematize their ideas, not usurp them.

On the days that papers are due, I ask all class members to attach a memo to their drafts telling what they want me to respond to or if they have specific questions for their readers (in addition to my comments, they get feedback on their drafts from peer writing groups.) I ask them to state in the memo what they proposed to do in writing this draft. The strategy of asking students to tell me what they intended to do in their writing is discussed in Judith and Geoffrey Summerfield's Texts and Contexts. I found these memos extremely useful in responding to student writing. Below is a sequence of memos between myself and a student about a paper she wrote on families. This does not include the long comments written on the sides of her paper.

My comments of first draft of L's paper: My basic question for you is - do you believe parents to be the sole cause for the decay of society today? If we are materialistic then why not blame capitalism (advertising, for instance) for trying to sell us things/services we don't need. Do you blame parents for giving things to their children that they themselves never had?

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[3]See also Nancy Sommer's articles "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Writers in CCC, 31 (Dec, 1980) and "Responding to Student Writing" in CCC, 33 No. 2, May 1982.

Aren't they trying to do better for them?

So, while I absolutely agree with you that family life is crucial (not essential or the only element, in determining a person's "fate" (as you say) - I am still unsure what a "stable" family life is to you.

As I said earlier, families are delicate, complex units. I hope these comments and questions help you refocus/revision your paper.

L's memo to me: I guess all your comments simply point out how narrowly I was approaching the family-life subject! I basically wrote all the views I had from growing up in a middle class white household and didn't even consider other people. I guess I was pretty ethnocentric. I hope my revision has cleared up some of the narrow-minded points. As far as in my writing groups, they didn't ask me the same questions because basically they said that the paper was good and how do you judge someone's opinion? I guess I've learned to try and write for an audience of all kinds of people and not only for those I am familiar with!

My memo to L's second draft: Thank you for clarifying all those questions I had. I really thought this revision was so much improved over the first draft and that you really thought about what you were saying. I was afraid I had come down too hard on you. You handled it beautifully. I just wanted to show you the consequences of what you were saying. You did a terrific job of revising!...

Obviously, this particular student easily acknowledged the problems I addressed in her argument and perhaps this says more about my authority than it does about facilitative commentary. There are always students who aren't easily "persuaded" to read as I do and one of the drawbacks of this method, if one can truly say this, is that some students may inevitably choose to ignore the teacher's comments. I learned to accept this resistance, after all, I had "authorized" their voices and coauthored the grading contract. I'm happy to say that I could not impose my readings on their texts (or any texts for that matter). They "owned" their texts and their readings.

Student-Generated Topics

To continue to encourage students to find and trust in what they have to say about their own learning, I have asked students to formulate their own topics for papers. We use the community of learners to help individuals arrive at topics by working in small groups to brainstorm to generate ideas, and to ask questions of one another about the topics we have considered. It gives each student an opportunity to develop a topic of interest while reinforcing a sense of community. I am an active participant

moving from group to group.

There have been times when I have thought that I am simply too lazy to dream up topics, but I have generally felt that each student knows what has been to particular interest, and should develop and expand on the interest. The pay-off for me is that their interest makes it interesting for me, and I invariably learn something, too.

These are some samples of topics which students developed.

1. Psychological analysis of three characters form three different stories through the development of a "new" story.
2. A look at three different life issues - aging, loneliness, religion - through a comparison of three generations represented by characters in "A Clean Well-Lighted Place."
3. Significance of character names to the theme of a story.
4. Comparison of religious attitudes in stories by Hughes and Hemingway.
5. Depiction of absent male characters in stories by women authors.
6. Individuals fighting a losing battle with society in stories by Faulkner and Hughes.
7. Individuals facing repressive forces in society in stories by Joyce and Hughes.
8. What clues titles give us about stories.
9. What happens in a story if we change the point of view?
10. The effect of setting on our understanding of characters.
11. The use of lighting in the staging of 'night Mother.
12. Conflict between men and women in Othello.
13. Was justice served in Othello and Oedipus Rex?
14. Has the value placed on human life changed over the centuries?
15. "As False as Water," based on a line from Othello.
16. "Jealously: Public and Private" (Creon and Iago).

I also ask students to work independently on m=novels that they have chosen. I develop some structure in the way of general guidelines so that we have some common ground for discussion. I ask them to make some critical interpretation of the book as well as to focus on a particular aspect that intrigues them and develop that. The novels chosen run the gamut from Emily Bronte to Sidney Sheldon. Why this latitude? I want them to choose something that they will enjoy reading, to read carefully and value their own responses to literature.

Students Evaluations of the Classes

It is fitting to end with our students' voices. We have provided both "good" and "bad" evaluations and provided some context to some of these in order to give a larger picture of ourselves and our students.

Anonymous Mid-Term Evaluation

I like the course. I would like to do more small group things. I would like to get to know the people on the other side of the room though.

I think you impose your feelings about feminism on the class. sometimes I don't agree with what you call chauvinism. We could read a story about electricity and you would read in chauvinism. I think overzealous judgment undermines and lessens the feminist movement for equality.k

This is one of my favorite responses because it typifies my position as a young Hispanic feminist instructor. White, middle-class students perceive my politics as threatening just as when they are presented with non-canonical texts they feel threatened. It seems ironic to me that my students fail to perceive that feminist pedagogy provides them with the classroom dynamics which allows the airing of their complaints about me or the course. Somehow the word sexism became chauvinism for this student; I never use the later term.

The second evaluation to my class is what I would call a "good" one and touches on small group discussions, revisions and grades.

Anonymous Mid-Term Evaluation

All in all, I'm pleased with the way this class is structured. I enjoy the majority of the stories that we read and the discussions. I feel that the small group discussions aren't as beneficial as I had hoped. Sometimes, I will really look forward to discussing the story and the others will want to talk about anything but the story. I think I am keeping up with my work, since I have always read the stories before class and my assignments have been handed in on time. Truthfully, I was proud of myself for having worked so hard on the revisions. At first I thought I wouldn't have to do a lot of work since the paper wasn't being graded - but I couldn't feel good about myself handling in a paper that I didn't put a lot of effort into. I really enjoy this class and look forward to attending (unlike some of my classes).

"Journal by Self" - evaluation

Still must admit I like these open-class, group discussions...when three or four people are talking to you instead of just one, it is great.

More Mid-Term Evaluation

Ever since I was in junior high school I have been told how great Shakespeare was. After all those years of being brain-washed I

don't really know if he is a good writer or bad. Some of the things we did in high school I thought was an over analization. My teacher read so much into it. I think that is great don't get me wrong. What I think they should have done was let us interpret it our own way. After all we can think, can't we. That's what I like about this class. I can interpret things the way I want. I hated English in high school because all I did was write about what the teacher wanted or said if you wanted to pass. I was a robot, no wonder I can't express myself in sentences today.

My general response to this class? that's a dangerous question. but seriously, I enjoy this class for a couple of reasons. The first is the open atmosphere that you have instilled in here. The second is the wealth of literature we are exposed to. I do have on e criticism though. I was hoping that there would be more opportunities to write short stories of fiction instead of just writing about stories. Other than that, I have enjoyed taking this class and have often enjoyed what we have done.

What more is there to say that the students' final evaluations affirmed almost universally that they enjoyed the class. Perhaps a better indicator of the success we achieved with feminist pedagogy is that we both enjoy and value the teaching process much more now.

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